

# THE WILSON BULLETIN

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## EDITORIAL

Acting upon our efficient secretary's suggestion, the editor is disposed to devote the space allotted to him in this issue to a brief resume of the trip which he took, with a class of students, from Oberlin to the Pacific Coast and back again; also with the indulgence of the readers of the Wilson Bulletin.

The train of six Ford touring cars, carrying seven men and fourteen women, left Oberlin just after 8 o'clock on the morning of June 21st. The itinerary carried the party across northern Ohio and Indiana and Illinois, to central Iowa at Grinnell. This far we had the hottest weather of the whole trip. To the ornithologist the most interesting thing about this part of the journey was the coming in of the Dickcissels in western Ohio, ever increasing in numbers to Grinnell, and the coming in, but in small numbers, of the Lark Sparrow. As the open country was reached, in western Indiana, with its numerous osage orange and other hedges along the roadside, Brown Thrashers, Catbirds, and Red-headed Woodpeckers became much more numerous because other available places for them became less frequent. To the ecologist the points of greatest interest were the gradual fading out of the beech trees as the open country was approached, in the region of Valparaiso, then the thinning out and final disappearance of the hard maples and their attendant shrubs and bushes, and the coming in of prairie grasses and other prairie plants, and the scampering striped spermophiles, or ground squirrels, until, in central Iowa, the natural groves of hickory and burr oak were confined to the immediate vicinity of the streams, or other bodies of water.

From Grinnell the route lay northward through Mason City, with a night's camp on the shore of Clear Lake; on through the outskirts of Minneapolis, to and through Itasca Park—a beautiful little park—and across to Grand Forks, North Dakota. In the lake country of south central Minnesota many ducks and other water fowl were seen, but we passed through the pine forests too rapidly to make much note of the peculiar bird life of that region. Besides, the weather had turned so cold that to avoid actual suffering from the cold we were obliged to cleat the curtains down and keep them so. And it continued cold across the open country of North Dakota. But we did manage to see many Long-billed Curlews, and a few Prairie Chickens and Prairie Sharp-tailed Grouse, not to mention jack rabbits and the ubiquitous "gophers"—brown fellows about the size of an average rat.

Central Montana was flooded. We were told that during the eight days preceding our arrival on the scene as much rain had fallen as they usually have in ten years. At any rate, we found the Missouri river at high flood, and the Milk river, along whose bottom the automobile road runs, out of its banks and over the roads for over 100 miles. We were advised to ship our cars by freight from Williston to Harlow, because "you can't possibly get through in time to see the big fight." Well, we were strangely uninterested in the fight, and as always, were looking for the impossible—for a Ford. A long detour northward over the rolling prairie took us to Wolf Point, where camp had to be made, along with scores of other touring parties, in the mud. The next morning, on the assurance of the officials of the local auto club that a government truck had or would mark out a trail to the northward over the rolling prairie, we chose to strike out. The first obstacle, before we reached the hills that bordered the broad valley, was a pond some ten rods wide and three feet deep. That was but the beginning of two days of grilling work getting around that flood. There were swollen streams in the valleys that had to be forded, and there were wide ponds and muddy stretches on the uplands. We soon lost count of the number of times that it was necessary to push one to all of those six cars across streams or through mud-holes, but it was a-plenty. The memory of that experience would not be unpleasant if we could forget the mosquitoes! They were everywhere at all hours of the day and night, and so many of them and such hungry ones that life became one constant torture. Ordinary mosquito netting was little protection, and we had not brought cheese-cloth with us. Four thicknesses of netting would keep most of them out. But pass it!

Three days in Glacier Park and four in Yellowstone, and on the way between them, the mosquito nuisance was reduced to almost normal. It would require more space than is at our disposal to try to enumerate the birds that we recorded in these two parks. Most of them have learned that it is not necessary to be shy or wary under the protection afforded them here. Of course we saw bear and deer in Yellowstone, as well as many of the lesser four-footed inhabitants of the open glades and the forests. There were a few White Pelicans, but no swans in Yellowstone where we were.

The route led out of the West Entrance of Yellowstone, and over the Old Oregon Trail that follows down the course of the Snake River and over the Blue mountains between Le Grande and Pendleton, Oregon, a region under a high state of cultivation, for the most part, because irrigation of the more arable parts of the valleys is made possible by the enormous springs that spout forth just beneath the covering rim rock of lava, high up on the bluffs. Then the Columbia Highway, from The Dalles to Portland. It will soon be completed between The Dalles and Pendleton. You ought to travel over it.

A week was spent at Manhattan Beach, a few miles north of Tillamook, Oregon, but we were not able to arrange a trip out to the islands where the sea birds breed in profusion, although interesting studies were made along the ocean beach and back in the luxuriant forests. The

humid Coast Forest would require a whole chapter to itself. There is nothing like it anywhere.

After this touch of the ocean beach we drove around through Astoria and up to Mount Ranier National Park, camping for three days at Paradise Valley, while the more venturesome climbed up the peak as far as the Half-way House, and at the snow fields saw the *Leucostictes*. The top of the mountain was visible for only the first half day, except for fleeting glimpses of it now and again. Birds were not much in evidence, probably because of the cold and damp. This ended the class part of the trip, but all but one of the party chose to drive down to southern California, and from there eleven of us returned by auto in one party and four joined another party, while the remaining four returned by train.

The bird life of California is so diversified, and certain species are so local in distribution, that the chance of making errors in identification of the local races is too great for one who wishes to be accurate, to risk a reconnaissance list. The writer is inclined to believe that the final test of the validity of a subspecies lies not in slight differences in color and proportions, but rather in recognizable differences in habitat and habit. As far as his experience with California forms is concerned, and it is admittedly slight, the indications are that the described subspecies for California are more entitled to recognition than are those, or most of them, in regions of less sharp topographic relief. For instance, in practical field work it is impossible to tell to which subspecies the breeding shrike of north-western Iowa belongs. Young of the same brood may vary beyond the limits of the subspecies. And this is only one of numerous instances. Intensive studies of the shrike may reveal recognizable habit differences, to be sure, but so far that is not the case. In general the habitat of *migrans* and *excubitorides* seems to be different, the one being the deciduous forest region, the other the true prairie region, but it would seem that from the standpoint of the shrike the habitats are essentially identical.

The above discussion will serve to show why the writer has not shared with the readers of the Wilson Bulletin these annual trips made in automobiles across the country. Both the laws of the states that are traversed and the conditions of the party trip make it not feasible to collect birds along the way. Lacking specimens in hand, and as complete a series of them as one could make, it is not possible, in many cases, to know for certain what particular subspecies he may be recording. And a list that is inaccurate is worse than no list at all. Recent discussions in *The Auk* in regard to the use of the names of species rather than subspecies where the precise subspecies cannot be determined, seems to the writer to indicate that most American ornithologists have come to look upon subspecies as of the same importance as species, or practically so, at least where local lists of birds are concerned. The writer protests vehemently. It is too big a handicap to the field worker.

The party returned from Pasadena over the Old Trails Route, that is the Santa Fee, as far as Trinidad, thence through Colorado Springs and Denver, and over the Denver, Lincoln, Detroit Highway, through southern

Nebraska and central Iowa, through Davenport to Joliet, and from there retraced their wheel marks to Oberlin. To the writer the return eastward toward home, with the familiar birds and landscapes, is rather more exciting than the trip westward. Anyway, it is made at higher speed and longer hours of driving. We just missed the cloud-bursts and consequent floods of Arizona and New Mexico and southern Colorado, but we did cross their tracks. Nor did we find the "desert" of eastern California and western Arizona the broiling oven that it is so often pictured. There were some bad stretches of road, but even over them we were able to average better than 200 miles a day with three Fords. In Colorado, Nebraska, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana and Ohio our average ran up slightly above 300 miles a day, between about 6:15 in the morning and 9 at night, with an hour out at noon for lunch. This is made possible by steady driving at between 25 and 30 miles an hour, rarely over 30. Of course this does not admit of stopping along the way to study each bird that flies up, or even sits on a fence post! On the way home we are not after birds, but home!

On such a trip one may expect to see upwards of 500 species and subspecies of birds, if he be not too careful about obscure subspecies, and accepts at face value the delimitation of ranges as given in the A. O. U. Check-List. A smaller party, more time given to the trip, and opportunity to stop at strategic places would swell this list materially. But these trips are not primarily for the purpose of compiling as large a list of the birds as possible, but are intended to be ecological in plan, and therefore birds become of secondary importance.